

Black Hawk: Impacting Native American History

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Shortly after settlers began to invade Native American territory, in what was later the Midwest, an agreement was signed stating that the land from the Mississippi River to Iowa belonged to white settlers. As a result of this negotiation Black Hawk decided otherwise, and the Black Hawk War began. Black Hawk had considerable leadership experience, but he lacked the ability to express how he really felt about the new settlers. In hopes of improving his capacity for expression, he started to write about everything that occurred. Through this, he realized that his gift was leadership, but his love was writing. Black Hawk was never recognized as a writer until after his death; people saw him as the leader of their tribe, and someone who was devoted to making their lives peaceful. Even though Black Hawk is mostly known for his leadership in the Black Hawk War, his writing strongly influenced people due to his accurate retelling of the struggles Native Americans faced in Illinois.

Black Hawk was fortunate to experience events such as the 1804 Treaty first hand, enabling him to write accurately of many historical events in Illinois. The 1804 Treaty was a document that forced the Sauk and Mesquakie tribes to forfeit their land east of the Mississippi River. Black Hawk declined the treaty, and confirmed the tribe's outrage towards it in his writings. Refusing to let his tribe move out of their land, he decided to agree with the settlers. As time went on, the settlers began threatening them, and Black Hawk started to reconsider his decision. The tribes were able to live with the white settlers for approximately eight years. Later, however, the British wanted Indian

land, and the War of 1812 began. Black Hawk and 500 of his men joined the British during the war. He recorded many things during that time, not about his experiences but about the enemy. “Their army lacks intelligence and strength” is how he described their forces in an early entry. The British were ultimately defeated; causing more white settlers to move into Iowa and Illinois. By the 1830s the Sauk and Fox Indians had moved to a reservation west of the Mississippi. The detailed entries Black Hawk recorded during this time have greatly helped people understand exactly what Native Americans had to endure.

After the war, Black Hawk made a camp twelve miles south of Rock Island. Shortly after, the Indians were summoned back to be “dealt with.” Black Hawk hesitated to go, but under threats of invasion he complied. Upon arrival, settlers claimed that they had come to sue for peace, which was not the case. Later, settlers started to write a document containing boundaries for the Indians. On June 30, 1831, the Articles of Agreement and Capitulation were signed. Black Hawk was reluctant to sign the article, but initially he cooperated. The document was submitted to President Andrew Jackson in hopes of being enforced, which it never was. Black Hawk was unaware that it was not in effect, and began to move his people to Rock Island. Upon arrival, white settlers began to complain. Eventually events turned violent. Black Hawk attempted to contact the United States government about this issue. This effort only resulted in false allegations about the Indians’ behavior. Black Hawk wrote about how his tribe was a very peaceful nation and that ignoring threats made directly to them was not hard, but facing the menace of them taking their land was hard.

For the next year settlers and Indians coexisted, and Black Hawk stood tall. The Fox chief Keokuk, however, was persuaded that Black Hawk's ideals were wrong. Because of him, by the end of the season most of Black Hawk's followers had left. Black Hawk recorded that despite their absence he would continue to stand up for what he believed. In 1828 President John Adams demanded that Illinois land be sold. Black Hawk wrote about how he refused to move, and fought the settlers. In August white militia attacked the Sauk. Although the attack was unanticipated, Black Hawk was not alarmed. He had been predicting that they would soon be aggressive. Black Hawk led the resistance and formed an alliance with the Winnebago, Pottawatomie, and the British. The Black Hawk War ended suddenly on August 2, 1832. Black Hawk was successful, but finally he surrendered. His surrender marked the end of Indian held land in Illinois.

Black Hawk's life after the war, and his last battles were the hardest time of his life. In his last battle, the Battle of Bad Axe, his men were greatly outnumbered by federal troops and militia. After being defeated, Black Hawk and his son were captured. They were kept in Fortress Monroe until 1833. When Black Hawk was released, he joined his troops on a reservation in Des Moines, Iowa, where he lived until his death on October 31, 1838. His body was placed in a small shelter in Indian fashion. Much later however, his body was dug up and transported to a museum in Iowa. Several years later it was destroyed in a fire. The museum wanted his body in order to display and clarify the impact on Illinois he had had. His writing was on display there as well so that people could be aware of the many struggles through which he helped Native Americans.

Although he is most well known for his leadership in the Black Hawk War, Black Hawk's writing strongly impacted people because of his precise retelling of the hardships

Native Americans struggled through in Illinois. Honesty made his writing more believable than others, therefore making it key in piecing together history. As a result of his dedication to recording the past, Black Hawk has made it possible for generations to know the truth about the many struggles that Native Americans and settlers faced in Illinois. His writings explained the wars, the negotiations, the fights, the threats, and the attempts for peace between two very different lifestyles. By writing and observing the settlers and his people, Black Hawk was able to determine that it is not only important to work through problems, but to work through their problems together, so that they could all enjoy Illinois. After all, "Illinois has something that no other land can provide, a destined life of happiness." [From Nancy Bonvillain, Black Hawk; Cyrenus Cole, I am a Man the Indian Black Hawk; Black Hawk, Black Hawk, Sauk Chief; Theo Jean Kenyon, "Black Hawk led the tribe proudly," The Journal Star, Feb. 9, 1997; and Ma-Ca-Tai-Me-She-Kia-Kiak, Tripod, <http://members.tripod.com/~Rfester/bhawk.html> (Sept. 2, 2005).]